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# Dialogics of Strategic Communication:

## Embracing Conflicting Logics in an Emerging Field

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### Abstract

*The aim of this article is to analyze how the field of strategic communication is shaped and driven by several different logics that not simply underpin each other, but also and simultaneously oppose each other and point in many different directions. We address the nature of such opposing logics using Morin's notion of "dialogics" and discuss five dialogics that challenge conventional notions of managerial control. While this perspective defies the ideal of strategic communication as a unitary discipline, we argue that the field can only develop by acknowledging, embracing and bringing to the fore of analysis principles that are at once complementary, competitive and antagonistic.*

## Introduction

Only ten years ago, strategic communication was defined and demarcated as a distinct field with a specific *raison d'être* (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Zerfass and Werder, 2017). Although multiple disciplines, including public relations, marketing, advertising, political communication, and health communication, are practicing strategic communication and have done so for ages (Bernays, 1952; Marchand, 1998), the ambition of strategic communication today is to constitute a discipline in its own right. Defined as purposeful communication that serves to advance the organization's mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007, p.4), the aim of strategic communication is to encompass and align the organization's different communication activities and subdisciplines in the service of the organization as a whole (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). As such, strategic communication has much in common with prevailing understandings of corporate communication or integrated communication that emphasize in various ways the importance of unity and cohesion in all communicative efforts (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). While such emphasis seems suitable in a hostile communication environment that expose and criticize inconsistencies and gaps of all sorts (e.g. Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010; Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008; Cornelissen, 2017), it may not serve strategic communication in the long run to focus unilaterally on unity and cohesion in its outlook and many practices. The overall aim of this paper is to unfold this point.

For a young discipline, it is understandable that multiple efforts are exercised in order to create a feeling of unity in terms of its objectives and theoretical perspectives (Argenti *et al.*, 2005; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2013; Nothhaft, 2016). The questions of what strategic communication *is*, what it *does* and *how* it does it are important to ask and seek answers to. Yet, behind façades of unity there are often fractures or tensions produced by encounters between disparate forces and incompatible organizing principles (e.g., Brunsson, 2003a). In spite of the noble aims of writers in the field, strategic communication is

not – and cannot be – coherent or unambiguous, neither as a scholarly endeavor nor as a managerial practice. As an organization-wide aspiration, strategic communication is shaped by multiple concerns, principles and forces that push the discipline in many different directions simultaneously. The tensions involved do not constitute aberrations in an otherwise impeccable organizational practice. Tensions between different concerns, principles and forces represent an inescapable condition for all living systems, including organizations (Morin, 1992). This condition and its implications need to enter official descriptions and definitions of strategic communication, even if this means accepting less order and predictability in theory and practice.

In this article, we argue that tensions are inescapable and potential keys to a deeper understanding of strategic communication. While they can be disruptive, they are also potential sources of disciplinary renewal (cf. Hardy *et al.*, 2006; Perlmutter, Netting, and Bailey, 2001). If strategic communication wants to live up to its ambition of becoming a new paradigm (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007) that truly stimulates new areas of interdisciplinary research (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017), it needs to embrace tensions and bring them to the fore of our understanding of strategic communication. In this article we make a first attempt to put center stage the productive potential of tensions. To that purpose we draw on Edgar Morin’s notion of “dialogics” according to which complex systems are characterized by multiple logics that are at once complementary, competitive and antagonistic with respect to one another.<sup>i</sup> In the remainder of this article, we first present Morin’s dialogical principle and its relevance in the context of organizations. Subsequently, we extend the dialogical principle to strategic communication and discuss five dialogics that challenge a coherent understanding of the field.

### **The Dialogical Principle**

The French sociologist Edgar Morin describes complex systems, like organizations and societies, as “*unitas multiplex*”, that is, entities characterized by order *and* disorder, coherence *and* incoherence, unity *and* disunity (Morin, 1987). To grasp the complexity of living systems, Morin points out, it is necessary to acknowledge the co-existence of multiple logics and to realize that these logics are not only complementary but also – and at once – antagonistic with respect to one another. The logics may be described as opposing forces or principles that in various ways shape or influence the system. While some logics are pursued deliberately, others develop organically and unintentionally. Morin’s term for the co-existence of different logics is *dialogics*. The dialogical principle signifies, in the words of Morin (1992, p. 77), “the symbiotic unity of two [or more] logics, which simultaneously nourish each other, compete against each other, live off each other, oppose and combat each other to death.” Examples of dialogics in social systems are openness-closure, individuality-collectivity, and autonomy-heteronomy. Importantly, even though such co-existing logics contradict each other and subject the system to multiple tensions, they are at once mutually co-dependent and necessary for the persistence and development of the system as a whole.

According to the dialogical principle, unity in complex systems is not the same as one-dimensionality or uniformity. In line with classical system theory, Morin points out that the unity of complex systems cannot be reduced to its elements, just as its constitutive elements cannot be reduced to the whole. Morin’s perspective, however, moves beyond these initial observations. Behind façades of unity there are often fractures created by encounters between different tendencies or organizing principles. The development of humanity, for example, cannot be explained sufficiently by emphasizing only reason, rationality, knowledge and other dimensions associated with the notion *Homo sapiens* (the wise man). As Morin (1973) argues, *Homo demens* (or the mad man) plays an equally significant role. The sapiens-demens dialogic, according to Morin, is both creative and destructive, just as science is simultaneously stimulated by logics and reason, on the

one hand, and by ignorance, anxiety, desire, and folly, on the other. Instead of ignoring or rejecting tendencies that seem to contradict a particular order, the dialogical principle allows us to put center stage exactly those systemic dimensions that are regarded as incompatible. To explain developments in complex systems, accordingly, we need to look not only at trends or tendencies that support each other and move the system in one particular direction, but also at divergent forces and principles that contradict each other and point in alternative directions (Morin, 1984).

This view entails an important distinction between dialectics and dialogics. Whereas the notion of dialectics implies that opposing forces are dissolved (at least temporarily) in synthesis, the idea of dialogics suggest that different logics *continue* to co-exist and compete and, moreover, that such competitive co-existence is essential for the system as a whole (Morin, 1992). The unity of European culture, for example, is not a simple synthesis of its Jewish, Christian, Greek, Roman (etc.) elements, but the result of a complementary, competitive, and antagonistic tension among these elements, each of which operates according to its own logic (Morin, 1987). The same applies to organizations, which are shaped by multiple tensions, including for example tensions between control and flexibility (e.g., Achrol, 1991), centralization and decentralization (Weick, 1987) and integration and differentiation (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a, 1967b). These tensions are inherent to the phenomenon of organization and cannot be erased by some synthesis between the opposing forces. Although tensions may manifest themselves differently in different epochs, they continue to exist and shape the system. The dialogical principle implies that no logic can gain supremacy and suppress or delete competing tendencies. “Dialogical means it is impossible to reach a sole principle, or a master word, whatever it is: there will always be something irreducible to a simple principle, be it chance, uncertainty, contradiction, or organization” (Morin, 1985, pp. 65-66; see also Morin, 1987). Although chance, uncertainty and contradiction occasionally involve serious

crises and setbacks for living systems, they are at the same time opportunities for the system to move forward.

In some respects, the dialogical principle resembles the notion of paradox. Defined as “[c]ontradictions that persist over time, impose and reflect back on each other, and develop into seemingly irrational or absurd situations because their continuity creates situations in which options appear mutually exclusive, making choices among them difficult” (Putnam *et al.*, 2016, p. 72; see also Lewis, 2000; Stohl and Cheney, 2001), paradox is certainly a potential dimension of dialogics. In the pursuit of decentralization, for example, organizations may often end up applying centralized measures (e.g., Weick, 1987). In contrast to such understanding of paradox, however, the dialogical principle emphasizes the creative and developmental potential of tensions between seemingly competitive and contradictory logics.

### **Dialogics in Strategic Communication**

As a particular type of organizing ideal and practice, strategic communication is equally shaped by multiple logics – concerns, principles and forces – that not only complement each other, but also and simultaneously compete and point in different directions. Strategic communication, as a consequence, is riddled with tensions that challenge its status as a unitary discipline.

The sources of such tensions are many, but are often a result of interactions between different disciplines and practices. Firstly, the field is shaped by multiple subfields – management, public relations, marketing, organizational communication, health communication, etc. – that emphasize different aspects of strategic communication and draw on distinctive sets of theories that each has their own logic (including different ontologies and epistemologies) (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015b). Although such multiplicity questions the ambition of synthesis in the field (e.g., Nothhaft, 2016), it is simultaneously a potential breeding ground for renewal and change.



Secondly, and more importantly for this paper, the encounter between theory and practice is simultaneously a significant source of divergence in the field (Nothhaft, 2016). Holtzhausen (2000; 2002), for example, has argued that the field of public relations is shaped by tensions between control-oriented management practices, on the one hand, and increased complexity of internal and external publics, on the other. Describing these tensions as a fundamental conflict between modernist and postmodernist outlooks and approaches, Holtzhausen calls for a paradigm shift that builds on the postmodern understanding of differences, diversity, dissensus and dissymmetry (see also Smith, 2013). Although Holtzhausen focuses her analysis on public relations, her perspective is equally relevant to the broader field of strategic communication that similarly needs to accommodate the existence of conflicting concerns, principles and forces. Our argumentation below follows this general insight as well as the observation that loss of control, consistency and predictability is a defining feature of postmodernity (see also Christensen, Torp and Firat, 2005). However, rather than discharging the field of strategic communication from modernist concerns and practices, which seems to be Holtzhausen's project, the dialogical perspective makes it possible to appreciate the *co*-existence of conflicting concerns, principles and forces and to acknowledge that the tensions involved are constitutive of the field. While the practice-theory dialogic represents an overarching schism between two different sets of realism that shapes the field, on the one hand a logic of managerial realism and, on the other, a logic of complexity, both logics are essential to the field. Although the former, with its emphasis on planning, prediction and control, represents a "paradigm of simplification" (Morin, 1985), it incorporates important practical tools designed to provide direction and guidance for practitioners. Conversely, whereas the logic of complexity may be critiqued for its distance to – and perhaps even irrelevance to – practical managerial issues (e.g., Nothhaft, 2016), its attempts to conceptualize the intricacies of contemporary communication environments is essential to keep the field vibrant.

The dialogical principle allows us to give more prominence to tensions between different ideals and practices in organizations and to acknowledge that such tensions have potential to stimulate organizational dynamics. At the same time, the dialogical principle makes it possible to conceptualize tensions as essential drivers of disciplinary development. In the remainder of the paper, we shall unfold this perspective by unpacking further the issue of *control* and the way it is being challenged in today's world. Specifically, we focus on five dialogics that represent variations of the control theme as it appears in strategic communication. While numerous dialogics are at play in the practices of contemporary organizations (e.g., Brunsson, 2003a), the five dialogics all center and converge around the issue of how managerial control is at once challenged and indispensable in contemporary organizations. Moreover, given our initial definition of strategic communication and its focus on the organization's mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2017, p.4), we have chosen to zoom in on dialogics that engage the organization as a whole. The five dialogics are: (1) deliberate vs. emergent perspectives on communication strategy; (2) top-down vs. participatory approaches; (3) bounded vs. unbounded notions of communication; 4) consistency vs. inconsistency in organizational messages; and 5) transparency vs. opacity in organizational practices. Focusing on the conception and unfolding of organizational strategies, the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and the issue of connection between organizational messages, these dialogics concern central dimensions of strategic communication as an ideal and practice. Importantly, while there are significant overlaps between the dialogics, they are not fully co-dependent. Obviously, bounded and consistent understandings of strategic communication often co-exist with deliberate approaches to strategy. Yet, there is no determinism involved. Unbounded understandings of strategic communication, for example, may co-exist with top-down *or* with participatory approaches. The dialogics, thus, do not amount to one coherent system of organizational ideals and practices, but allow for multiple complementary, competitive and antagonistic relationships. The aim of this paper is to bring the

dialogics to the fore of the analysis in order to unfold the view that the co-existence of opposing logics, although wrought with tensions, is vital to the field and its sustained ability to encompass and balance relevance and precision.

### **Deliberative – emergent dialogic**

The tension between deliberate and emergent strategies is not unique for the field of strategic communication, but has – along with the managerial perspective – been imported from the strategy and management field. Although the latter has presented many alternative ways of understanding strategy, most strategic thinking in the field of strategic communication continues to assume that strategies are intentionally designed, planned and implemented, in other words deliberative.

According to this perspective, strategy encompasses a consciously programmed course of action purposely intended to ensure that set objectives are achieved (Mintzberg, 1990; Whittington, 2001). The process of creating a strategy, thus, is regarded as a focused and controlled activity, whose end-result is fully formulated and explicitly articulated in advance (Ansoff, 1965, 1991; Mintzberg, 1990; Porter, 1996). In this perspective, environments are predictable and developments foreseeable (Mintzberg, 1987, 1990). Also, since there is a clear separation of planning and implementation (Mintzberg, 1990), thinking is assumed to always precede action (Brunsson, 2006). The dominance of this perspective in strategic communication is apparent in the overwhelming emphasis on the planning dimension. Most textbooks on strategic communication, thus, include chapters on the necessity of having long-term communication strategies and short-term plans, guidelines on how to produce these documents, and the importance of letting these drive subsequent activities (e.g., Tench and Yeomans, 2014). Although it is easy to criticize those assumptions, this perspective is necessary and inescapable within the logic of managerial realism and its focus on ensuring direction for – and, thereby, enabling – organizational activities.

By contrast, the emergent perspective has mainly described strategy as a set of consistent actions and behaviors that over time form a pattern that was not initially anticipated or intended (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Quinn, 1978). Such strategies, according to Tsoukas (2010), may emerge gradually through the day-to-day handling of practical situations in which actors make sense of the task at hand (see also Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2001). When disruptions or unexpected events disturb such practices, actors are likely to pay explicit attention to what they have done and retrospectively make sense by identifying a pattern that explains the current state of affairs (Tsoukas, 2010; cf. Weick, 1995). Emergent strategies do not necessarily unfold unconsciously. They may, alternatively, be solicited and allowed to surface from field-tests that examines, for example, how proposals are received among legislators and public interest groups, or how awareness, understanding and acceptance is created among organizational members (Quinn, 1978). King (2009), one of the few communication researchers that applies the emergent strategy perspective, e.g., proposes that “(...) practitioners might design a series of pre-messages for sample target audiences, establishing a design/test cycle to better achieve communicative goals and inform future messages” (p. 35). Accordingly, organizations, first test ideas and proposals in smaller scope, and afterwards retrospectively try to identify effective patterns. While emergent perspectives are potentially participatory (discussed below), they may in principle develop organically without explicit involvement of employees and other stakeholders.

There have been occasional calls in strategic communication to embrace an emergent perspective (e.g., Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015a). Generally, however, the field is dominated by a deliberative conception of strategy. In cases where both perspectives are discussed, the productive tensions between them are not fully acknowledged or brought to the fore of the analysis (e.g., Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). Without discussing the potential contradictions at play, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015b), for example,

propose an emergent perspective after having defined strategic communication in purposeful and goal-oriented terms.

From a dialogical perspective, the interplay between deliberate and emergent perspectives needs to be addressed as a complementary, competitive and antagonistic relationship. Not only do the logics represent different ontologies, they also describe different and opposing activities. Since the deliberate understanding prescribes a set of actions where end goals and milestones are specified in advance, it may have a tendency to rule out alternatives. Conversely, the emergent perspective tends to ignore, downplay or deny the value of a fully developed and formulated plan. In spite of these opposing logics, however, the two perspectives have potential to invigorate each other in significant ways. Attention, creativity and awareness of alternatives are likely to thrive better in the context of a well-described strategy (Christensen *et al.*, 2017). Empirically, this perspective has the potential to improve our understanding of strategizing among communication practitioners. For instance, in a study of the Swedish Green Party and its campaigning process, Svensson (2016) shows how tensions and conflicts may arise when members are unable to unfold the campaign in accordance with its intention (a deliberate perspective). Although members attempted to follow the plan to the letter, they repeatedly resorted to more emergent practices. And while they were frustrated by such deviations, the emergent practices facilitated flexibility and stimulated creativity. Eventually, thus, the dialogics of deliberate planning and emergent practices helped the campaign stay up to date without its overall idea getting lost.

In a dialogical perspective, thus, organizations may follow fully formulated and explicit strategies, based on intentional and conscious choices, while allowing for flexible and creative solutions that challenge and diverge from the initial plans. While managerial control is under pressure in such situations, it still constitutes an important dimension of the process. This point will be further elaborated in the following.

### **Top-down – participatory dialogic**

Strategic communication is often described as an important management practice aimed at coordinating and integrating all communication that represents the organization as a whole. As such it is usually assumed to be concentrated at the top of the organization (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014; Frandsen and Johansen, 2015; Proctor and Kitchen, 2002; Raupp and Hoffjan, 2010; Varey and Mounter, 1997). As the authors of the communication strategy, communication managers are expected to be in a privileged position of observation. Those who engage in strategy-making are, thus, portrayed as “strategists” (Brønn, 2001) or “goal-oriented rational subjects” (Verhoeven *et al.*, 2011, p. 100) able to formulate communication objectives that guide subsequent work (Hallahan, 2015). While communication is something that everyone in the organization does, the communication function is expected to ensure that messages are aligned with and support the organizations strategy, often emphasizing the importance of speaking with one voice (Argenti *et al.*, 2005). In this logic, not only external stakeholders are regarded as target groups, but also internal stakeholders who are expected to help enhance the organization’s performance (e.g., Goodman, 2000; Hallahan, 2015) or act as ambassadors for the strategy (e.g., Falkheimer and Heide, 2015). This top-down logic involves a communicational hierarchy with predetermined (communicational) positions that define strategists as those who think, plan and execute, and other employees as either the targets or implementers (Svensson, 2016).

Although researchers and practitioners are often emphasizing the significant roles of stakeholders in processes of strategy-making, the field of strategic communication has mainly focused on *external* stakeholders and the question of how these audiences may be integrated in conversations, co-productions and co-creations, e.g., of the brand or the organizational identity (e.g., Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016). *Internal* stakeholders and their role in shaping communication strategies are rarely considered. By contrast, relevant sub-fields, such as change communication and

CSR, often regard employees as important stakeholders (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2015; Lewis, 2011). Although the motive behind employee engagement in change projects is often instrumental (e.g., reduce feelings of uncertainty, increase readiness and create a stronger commitment to the change) and rarely implies active voice (for a typology of participation, see Deetz, 1995), some change initiatives allow employees to take active part in the change process, for example by drawing up action plans (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2015). In writings on CSR, the centrality of letting employees initiate CSR-projects is strongly emphasized (e.g., Morsing *et al.*, 2008). In these cases, employees are not viewed simply as target groups or implementers of a preset plan, but as partakers in the very identification of strategic issues.

There are, of course, obvious tensions between management regimes that desire and require a level of unanimity of action with the current age of “participation” in which input from employees is regarded as a valuable source of insight and renewal (Sewell, 1998). Coordinating different people’s actions and communication usually means reducing the range of actions available, which tends to undermine the ability to identify and promote new values, to perform new tasks or to handle new situations (Brunsson, 1985). Conversely, full-fledged participatory solutions are likely to reduce managerial control (Holtzhausen, 2000). Top-down managerial strategizing and participation may, therefore, in many situations be viewed as competing or even antagonistic logics. However, as has been shown by researchers in change communication, for example (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2015), employee participation does not mean abandoning the managerial prerogative to initiate and conduct processes of strategizing. What it means is that strategists systematically draw on the knowledge and expertise that already exist in the organization. For instance, by soliciting knowledge and expertise of rank-and-file members, management has the possibility to include elements of locally emergent solutions, thereby strengthening the deliberate strategy. This implies being open, flexible and perceptive in the whole process of strategy-making, but also to stop

once in a while and take a look at which activities have been conducted according to the plan (and how) in order to espy how things actually unfold.

Christensen *et al.*, (2017) conceptualize such practice as a “license to critique”. The aim of the license to critique approach is to establish a system of participation that is sufficiently organized, concrete and local to guide and encourage ongoing participation. Ideally, the interplay between top-down and participatory processes involves common process rules (Christensen *et al.*, 2008) that allows for constructive contestations of strategic plans. When such approach is fully implemented, the relationship between top-down and participatory practices is not only competitive, but also and at once complementary and mutually constitutive. In some types of organization, for instance political parties that celebrate internal democracy, this would mean that leaders and communication strategists allow members to fully participate in discussions concerning issue positions and policy proposals, all the while the formulation of specific messages, decisions on strategies, channels etc. is something communication experts can work with. By encouraging other points of observation and thereby contemplating alternative strategies (cf. Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987), the complementary potential of the dialogic can be unfolded. For this to be possible, of course, the managerial control prerogative needs to be tempered to avoid discursive closure (Deetz, 1992).

### **Bounded – unbounded dialogic**

Allowing for such expansive participation, of course, challenges the goal-setting dimension of strategy and strategic communication. The basic idea in strategic thinking is *to focus*, that is, to zoom in and concentrate on a delimited set of ideas or activities deemed more important than other matters (Mintzberg, 1987). Strategic communication, accordingly, may refer to all communicative efforts that facilitate and support such focused endeavors. As we have seen, many writings in the field seek to confine strategic communication to communication practices that help organizations



fulfill their missions (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; see also, Frandsen and Johansen, 2017; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015b). Other attempts to achieve a concentrated focus in the field include ideals of integration (e.g., Argenti *et al.*, 2005; Gronstedt, 1996; Scholes and Clutterbuck, 1998), principles of “common starting points” (van Riel, 1995) or various efforts to identify and control key “contact points” (Gronstedt, 2000). Across their differences, these attempts to focus on a limited set of communicative parameters share the conviction that the professional communication of an organization is best approached by ruling out elements that cannot be integrated or controlled. Such understanding of strategic communication, in other words, assumes that it is possible and desirable to demarcate and circumscribe the field’s proper area of engagement.

Parallel to such efforts, however, the potential remit of the field is rapidly expanding. Driven by digital communication technologies, a growing horizon of actors (e.g., commentators, bloggers, social media users, etc.) are able to comment on and, eventually, challenge organizational messages and identities (e.g., Castells, 2015). BP’s rebranding campaign “Beyond Petroleum”, for example, has often been attacked by critical stakeholders parodying its message and challenging the ability of the company to sustain its desired identity as a responsible company (Christensen *et al.*, 2015; Greyser, 2010). At the same time, it is becoming ever more clear that each individual actor cannot be reduced to one specific receiver role (for example, consumer *or* citizen *or* employee), but embody all these roles at once (Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003). These developments not only increase the number of messages and viewpoints that organizations need to monitor and, eventually, respond to; they simultaneously decrease predictability and defy simplistic notions of managerial control and strategizing.

Today, it has become more obvious than ever that receivers of organizational messages are co-constructors of meaning (Eco, 1979; Duranti, 1986). So far, however, the field of strategic communication seems unable to handle the challenge. Although a growing number of cases,

including the BP case mentioned above, illustrate that message control is tenuous, most discussions of alternative voices still operate within a space narrowly delineated by organizational strategists. While some approaches seek to contain the collaborative potential by integrating outside voices in the strategy (e.g., King, 2009), others argue that because still more dimensions of organizational life have potential to communicate, everything *must* be handled strategically as communication (Gronstedt, 1996). Aberg's (1990) notion of "total communications" is just one manifestation of this attempt to seize the essentially unbounded nature of communication, to circumscribe and tame it and thereby reduce diversity to simple principles of regulation and control (for a critique, see Christensen *et al.*, 2008). Although the attempt to restore predictability is understandable, such "mutilating reduction" of complexity (Morin, 1985, p. 63) is likely to prevent the field from fully understanding the nature of the communication environment in which it operates. While bounded notions of strategic communication are necessary – at least temporarily – to enable organizational focus and action, scholars need to recognize that the unbounded nature of communication is a significant source of renewal for the field. The fact that various audiences frequently interpret organizational messages differently from their original purpose, reshape and adapt them to personal use, and modify and sometimes pervert their meanings in ways not imagined by their creators (Cova, 1996) is, of course, extremely frustrating for strategic communicators. Yet, the ability to detect and acknowledge alternative understandings of organizational messages in advance of external exposure is crucial. It speeds up learning and helps organizations navigate in a world of multiple voices and. The participatory practices discussed above are likely to foster such ability. But ongoing engagement with *external* audiences is crucial too, even though such engagement may challenge and disappoint the plans and ambitions of communication strategists.

Since any attempt to enclose strategic communication is likely to be challenged by new and unforeseen communication practices, strategic communication needs to be redefined as a far

more expansive and receiver-oriented practice that navigates between bounded and unbounded understandings of what may represent the organizational sender. The productive potential of the bounded-unbounded dialogic can only be released if the field of strategic communication acknowledges the value of deviant voices *and*, simultaneously, the need to contain them within a coherent strategy.

### **Consistency – inconsistency dialogic**

The ability to embrace complexity, however, is challenged by other concerns and forces in the field. One of the most pervasive principles in contemporary communication practice is the notion of *consistency*. Based on the conviction that credibility, trustworthiness and legitimacy reside in systematic and coherent messaging, organizations are usually advised by consultants, textbooks and scholars to coordinate their many communication activities and align all messages across different audiences and different platforms (e.g., Argenti *et al.*, 2005; Coombs, 2009; Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). The intention behind such integrative endeavours is to minimize discrepancies between organizational messages and behaviours, including front stage and back stage, ideals and practice, and current messages and messages of the past. Lack of consistency and the existence of “gaps” between these dimensions are not only taken to represent unprofessional communication, but are furthermore seen as signs of organizational insincerity (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). With a growing focus on revealing and criticizing such gaps in public debate, it is understandable that consistency efforts occupy such a significant place in strategic communication.

In spite of such efforts, inconsistencies are constantly identified and reported by journalists, NGOs, employees and other relevant stakeholders. While some inconsistencies may be attributed directly to deceptive practices or poor management, many are unavoidable results of attempts to navigate in complex environments shaped by multiple concerns, audiences and demands (Lindblom, 1959). As Brunsson (2003b) points out, contemporary organizations face “a rising tide

of frequently contradictory demands” (p. 1). While aiming for consistency and alignment, organizations must simultaneously respond to divergent pressures, norms and standards in areas such as safety, sustainability, diversity, justice, transparency, etc. The communicative “acrobatics” involved in such responses are likely to produce perceptions of inconsistency in the shape of decoupling (Bromley and Powell, 2012), hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2003a) and even “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005).

A significant task of strategic communicators is to avoid or minimize such perceptions by helping organizations stay clear of discrepancies and major contradictions. This task, however, describes a very limited understanding of strategic communication. Although the general trend in the literature is to eliminate inconsistency – for example, by identifying gaps and reducing them (Hatch and Schultz, 2001) – it is important to understand that inconsistency may serve positive roles. In the first three dialogics discussed above – deliberate-emergent, top-down-participatory and bounded-unbounded – the significance of *both* principles involved are, at least partially, acknowledged in the field. The value of emergent, participatory and, to some extent, unbounded, forces are, in other words, recognized in writings on strategic communication (e.g., Guldbrandsen & Just, 2016). This is not the case, however, when it comes to the consistency-inconsistency dialogic, possibly because the notion of inconsistency seems to defy conventional understandings of managerial control. Although the difficulties of creating consistency are often acknowledged (e.g. Hatch and Schultz, 2001), the significance and potential value of inconsistency remains to be theorized. Below we take a first step in that direction.

If strategic communication were regarded in isolation, as a goal in itself, it might make sense to pursue consistency vigorously by squeezing out all contradictions or gaps. Yet, if we accept that strategic communication serves broader organizational purposes, like inspiring employees and other stakeholders and stimulating better practices, the relationship between

consistency and inconsistency needs to be reconsidered. As long as organizational messages only describe existing accomplishments and refrain from articulating ideals and projects that point into the future, it is significantly easier to stay off the “radar” of critical stakeholders and come across as fully consistent. As soon as organizations begin to claim ideals and values that are not entirely implemented yet they attract attention and subject themselves to potential pressure. Such pressure, however, is useful in processes of change. Lunheim (2005, p. 7) provides an interesting example from the context of corporate social responsibility:

If you dress things up a little – that is, begin to tell the company’s CSR story – it can affect, positively, how you feel and act. It can have other consequences as well. CSR communication can be deceptive and harmful, and it can be a magic, albeit misleading wand in the social creation of reality. A tint of gloss and window-dressing is surely guaranteed to make critics eager to peep through the curtains and soon, more windows may be flung open than you could have imagined or wished for. Yet, if you are sufficiently brave or cheeky to communicate a few inches ahead of the actual state of affairs, as a CSR professional you can help to assure that reality follows suit. If visionary leaders hadn’t had the nerve to dream and talk ahead of reality, many important innovations would not have occurred.

Christensen *et al.*, (2013) extend Lunheim’s perspective by arguing that inconsistencies may function as productive idealizations, provided relevant stakeholders hold organizations to their words (Bromley and Powell, 2012). With their notion of “aspirational talk”, understood as communication to which current organizational practices cannot *yet* live up, they claim that provisional differences between talk and current practices are necessary to drive change. Aspirational statements expressed in public media of high status and authority, especially, are likely to attract the attention of critical stakeholders because they define or illuminate a collective “horizon” of excellence to which employees, NGOs and other stakeholders can hold the organization accountable. Without such statements and the implied inconsistencies, changes are likely to be slow or insignificant.

Inconsistencies, thus, are not always undesirable. The dialogical tension between consistency and inconsistency has constitutive potential in the sense that it may inspire and drive organizational development and change. In order to unfold such productive potential, of course, aspirations – and the inevitable gaps they represent – need to be accepted as preparatory stages toward a better organization. As these arguments illustrate, neither consistency nor *in*consistency are valuable in isolation. In line with the dialogical principle, the consistency ideal and the gap-reducing practices it implies are necessary to release the productive potential of *in*consistency. Inconsistency and consistency, thus, are at once complementary, competitive and antagonistic forces that are necessary for the persistence and development of the system as a whole (Thyssen, 2009).

### **Transparency – opacity dialogic**

Assessments of consistency and inconsistency, of course, presuppose an ability to actually compare and evaluate different dimensions of what organizations say and do. While this may often be difficult to do in practice, strategic communication and related fields seem to assume that this is in fact possible today due to increased transparency (Christensen, 2002). With the advent of digital communication technologies and the arenas for public access, attention and critique that they afford, the presumption of transparency occupies an important role in contemporary organizations (Whelan *et al.*, 2013). At the same time, transparency has become a powerful value that influences and shapes organizational strategies and the type of communication that organizations are expected to maintain with the public (e.g., Palenchar and Heath, 2007). The prevailing view is that transparency is required in order to establish and maintain trust between organizations and their many stakeholders (e.g., Oliver, 2004; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014). Specifically, transparency is assumed to facilitate stakeholder insight and, as such, serve to reduce fraud, power abuse, corruption, tax evasion and other types of organizational evil (Henriques, 2007; Oliver, 2004).

Especially in areas where responsibility is promoted and expected, transparency is elevated to a grand vision of openness, accountability, and knowledge.

In this context, the issue of managerial control becomes even more intricate. On the one hand, transparency seems to reduce managerial control by transferring it to critical audiences who can monitor and thereby influence organizational decisions and practices (Hood & Heald, 2006). On the other hand, organizations assume that it is possible to regain control by monitoring themselves through self-transparency and, on the basis of this insight, pursue consistency in everything they say and do (Christensen and Langer, 2009). Both assumptions, however, ignore the fact that transparency and its opposite, *opacity*, are two sides of the same coin. In fact, opacity is integral to all transparency endeavors. Any attempt to pull out an area for inspection, to illuminate certain corners of an organization or to add information about specific practices is an act of selection that directs attention to certain areas while others are left in the dark (Christensen and Cheney, 2015). Even with the best intentions of increasing insight, this is a fundamental aspect of all knowledge creation. As such, transparency practices – whether initiated by the organization itself or organized by its critical audiences – are acts of control. In most cases, organizations have more resources to exercise this type of control.

The tensions involved in the transparency-opacity dialogic remain to be articulated in the field. As the antonym of transparency, opacity is usually not considered a state worth pursuing by strategists and communicators, at least not officially. Yet, even when organizations officially celebrate transparency, they often seek to avoid or limit it. Opacity practices can be more or less deliberate and may include efforts to influence classification schemes, levels of comparison, modes of presentation, and the timing of disclosure to mention just a few of the attempts by organizations to work around increased demands for transparency (Fenster, 2006; Heil and Robertson, 1991). Hospitals that are required by law to publicize mortality rates at their premises, for example, may

choose to reject patients that are likely to die in their custody (Fung *et al.*, 2007). Transparency, thus, not only means to present the organisation as it “is”, free from guile and pretension. It also and simultaneously means to pose, to display, to stage, to frame and perhaps even to hide – because to present something inevitably implies to conceal.

Importantly, the relationship between transparency and opacity is not dialectical. As conflicting forces they constantly violate and defy each other without ever integrating, suppressing or abolishing the opposite side. The possibility of establishing a synthesis between transparency and opacity is, in other words, inconceivable. Instead, transparency and opacity continue to co-exist, to cultivate each other, resist each other, and oppose each other in numerous ways. The price for accuracy and precision in financial (or sustainability) reporting, for example, is usually a high level of complexity that makes such reports inaccessible to the average stakeholder (Henriques, 2007). The same is true for much auditing (Power, 1997) or nutritional labelling (Fung *et al.*, 2007). While designed to increase transparency and public insight, such practices often reproduce opacity in a different shape (Christensen and Cheney, 2015).

Sometimes such consequences are unintentional. At other times, they are carefully calculated. Even though organizations are likely to implement a growing number of transparency initiatives, for example because they are forced to do so by authorities, NGOs or other critical audiences, they will continue to have multiple reasons for concealment (Eisenberg, 1984). Such reasons need to enter official descriptions of strategic communication. Moreover, even when organizations have “nothing to hide”, they may never get to know themselves well enough to deliver accurate descriptions on all significant matters (Christensen, 2002). This is not an error or aberration in organizational practice that can be annulled, but a fundamental condition that needs to influence how strategic communication is theorized and practiced. In many respects, opacity is a far more realistic dimension of managerial control than transparency. The field of strategic



communication, therefore, needs to foreground opacity and its significant role in organizations, both as an inevitable side-effect of all transparency endeavors *and* as a separate and distinct control objective of strategy and communication. Although organizations, for reputational reasons, may prefer to emphasize and celebrate the transparency side of the dialogic, research in the field should not bypass the role of opacity just because it clashes with other social values and ideals. Instead of reproducing one-sided organizing ideals, it is essential that research embrace the ambiguity and complexity of organizational practices, including those associated with the transparency-opacity dialogic.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

In this article, we have argued that strategic communication, as a theoretical as well as a practical discipline, is characterized by multiple dialogics, that is, principles or forces that are at once complementary, competitive and antagonistic (Morin, 1992). Specifically, we have highlighted and discussed the following five dialogics that represent variations of the issue of managerial control and its tenuous nature in today's world: (1) deliberate vs. emergent perspectives on communication strategy; (2) top-down vs. participatory approaches; (3) bounded vs. unbounded notions of communication; 4) consistency vs. inconsistency in organizational messages; and 5) transparency vs. opacity in organizational practices. While we do not suggest that these are the only dialogics at play in the context of strategic communication, we argue that these five illustrate how managerial control is at once challenged and indispensable in contemporary organizations. At the same time, they allow us to investigate the limitations of field's ostensible engagement with the organization as a whole..

Our principal argument is that the inherent dynamics at play in each of these dialogics need to be acknowledged, embraced and brought to the fore in order for strategic communication to develop as a field. In a dialogical perspective, tensions and incompatibilities between different

ideals and principles are not considered errors or abnormalities. Rather, they are keys to a deeper understanding of the many, often conflicting, standards and concerns that inevitably characterize a social practice like strategic communication. While writings in the field occasionally acknowledge some of the tensions and dynamics mentioned in this article, the healthy and productive potential of these tensions and dynamics still remain to take center stage in analyses of strategic communication.

The official ideology of strategic communication, as represented in many scholarly articles, textbooks and consultancy writings, has tended to emphasize especially the deliberate, bounded and top-down notions of the field, often including an emphasis on consistency and transparency. This perspective is usually considered the most rational approach to strategic communication and one that allows for managerial control (e.g., Argenti *et al.*, 2005). Yet, as Morin (1986) points out, true rationality can be recognized by its capacity to identify its own shortcomings. Gradually, alternative or opposing principles and forces – including emergent, participatory, unbounded, inconsistent, and opaque tendencies – have begun to enter the field, either via changes in management fashions and ideals or because experience has demonstrated that the dominant perspective, if pursued without sensitivity to its limitations, is untenable in practice. Still, the existence of such opposing principles and forces has not significantly altered the self-perception of the field. If theory is going to matter more fundamentally to strategic communication, it needs to be willing to foreground and conceptualize all relevant dialogics without reducing or glossing over their inherent tensions and dynamics. Moreover, it needs to approach these dialogics as significant sources of insight and development.

As for a dialogic research agenda, we envision two parallel, but integrated lines of development. On the one hand, more studies of strategic communication practices, strategy-making and practitioners' everyday life need to be conducted. By studying these practices *in vivo* we can

acknowledge and embrace dialogics at play, gain knowledge about their intersections, how they influence activities and interactions, and how they are handled. Such knowledge would not only strengthen our understanding of practitioners' everyday work activities, but also enable more accurate accounts of what strategic communication is. In turn, this knowledge can prove viable in enhancing not only practitioners understanding of those (seemingly irreducible) tensions that emerge and shape their communication work, but also influence what we teach strategic communication to be at institutions of higher education. In this way, we would provide our students with even better tools to understand and handle the complex reality that awaits.

Methodologically, the best way to study dialogics in strategic communication practice, is by conducting ethnographic field-work or using ethnographically inspired methods. Although interviews and different versions of self-reporting have the potential of leading to further understanding, there is often a discrepancy between what people say they do, and what they actually do. Most people retrospectively rationalize their activities and try to make them fit into a pattern that correspond with the ideal(s) (Morin, 1987; Weick, 1979). This is why methods that exclude observations would make it difficult for the researcher to get deep enough information about the dialogics that are studied.

On the other hand, for this type of research to be fruitful to the field, more abstractions and theoretical discussions are simultaneously required. In order to actually gain useful knowledge about dialogics in the field, conducting narrow case studies is not enough. Empirical studies of dialogics need to speak to and develop the theory. Also, conceptual work that further discusses dialogics in strategic communication would be highly beneficial to the field.

These suggestions for expanding our knowledge about dialogics in strategic communication practices are not attempts at replacing or outweighing managerial realism for the

benefit of a more complex realism. Quite the contrary; it is an effort to retain a fruitful tension between different logics that shapes the field of strategic communication.

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<sup>i</sup> N.B. Morin’s notion of dialogics and its application in this paper differs from its typical use in the public relations literature where “dialogic” is often associated with the works of Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002). Building on the ideal of two-way communication and communicative ethics, Kent and Taylor argue that dialogical principles can be useful for organizations when establishing online relationships with publics.